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Ravensbrück

It is my little jacket that I remember. My gray jacket made of flimsy material and yet lice nested there in the hundreds, and they lay eggs in the thousands. Each time I picked up my jacket and looked inside it, I had to set out on a massacre of lice, and pulling out of the eggs that seemed to be attached by iron threads. And yet, I could not exterminate them, and they kept multiplying.

And the Germans did not succeed in exterminating me either. Each dawn at 5:00 a.m. after a night on my straw sack and the numberless lice eating on my flesh still left in a thin layer on my protruding bones, crouching under my lice jacket at night in a barrack where cold roamed inside like a biting dragon, and outside the snow blackened by tracks, wooden boot tracks of females like me, but not for much.

Each dawn at 5:00 after a visit to the reeking outhouse tracking in the snow, in the dark. We ^{followed} one another in silence, eliminating small eliminations, suited to zero intake during the day. We set out to march in orderly lines to aviation factory in Wültemberg. And not enough that I had to listen to these terror provoking metal birds in Poland at outset of the war, and not enough that here in Ravensbrück, when they appeared in the sky and were classified as belonging to the enemy, we were rushed in the snow night to a bunker by the women with voices sounding like guns. Not enough of all that, I had to stand under a giant metal wing, closely supervised by German eyes, and with my fingers drive screws into the metal.

And there, at a nearby table he stood, Der Meister, the supervisor. Red hair and a red mustache on his face. And he very plain looking, and very simple spoken. But there was something in his chest that lived. Or maybe he just liked me. He used to say I was pretty.

How could anyone say "pretty" to a tortured starved creature like me? But he did and he made hairpins for me out of steel to put in my hair. I had some hair but I did not know what it looked like - we had no mirrors. Secretly der Meister would bring me small sandwiches, pieces of fruit. Once he even brought me a piece of chocolate, imagine, a piece of chocolate! I would wander off with these to the bathroom, and eat them in hiding, so no one will, ^{now} and no one will see. Most important, he let me warm water with a blow torch under the table, and when one of these women with a voice sounding like a gun would appear, der Meister would kick me slightly, and I would crawl from under the table, and pretend to be hard at work. In the warm water, under the table I would wash the only set of underwear I possessed, to deter the lice. I think they preferred the dirt, and liked to nest there better.

Der meister used to talk to me and whisper in my ear secretly: You know, the Russians are advancing. Soon the war will be over, and then you will be able to do to us what we have done to you. But the Gestapo are planning to kill you all beforehand. They have dug a large grave outside Wültemberg. I am planning to take you to my house and hide you in my cellar. And so I lived with this promise of extended life till one day, one morning when I arrived at my table of work in the aviation factory, Der Meister disappeared without a word, and was replaced by a stern looking German who never paid much attention to me, and never offered to save me from anything.

In the metal wing factory we received once a day our portion of food. Standing in a line, our feet dragging in the wooden boots, we advanced slowly toward the cursing hands that were to measure out a half cup of watery soup, and a slice of dry bread. That was the fuel to keep us running for rest of the day assembling plane parts, marching back to Ravensbrück and again.

continues...

When night fell on the camp, and before the curfew to stay in our barrack, I would curl my body under the lice festering jacket, and try to close my eyes, and retire for a short time perhaps to a world of dreams. I don't think dreams dared to visit this place, so I had to pray for plain sleep that will allow me to open my eyes next morning when the sun or gray skies greeted the day, and I don't think that I knew the difference. With breaking of the day, sounds of whistles from the SS women, summoned us outdoors, to a count. They had to make sure none of us had escaped during the night, dared to drop dead on the straw sack, or perhaps schemed some form of resistance. So we were counted like cattle or worse because cattle was allowed to graze freely. There was not a single thing we could do freely, not even go to the outhouse. Even there we were watched by bullet eyes.

Communal Bath

Once in two or three weeks we were all escorted marching the streets of Wultemberg to a communal bath. There we were given the opportunity to wash the skin close to our bones in a place too small for all our naked bodies. We layed down on the floor, close to one another and tried to take in the heat for once that we so missed in the cold, cold barrack. But here the evil hands turned the heat so high that one time I remember myself fainting, and one of the bullet eye women remarking sweetly what beautiful eyes I had, noting the feverish light in them. I was still coming back to myself when a little man in a uniform and a rifle on his back appeared at the door looking at us in our helpless nakedness, and a weakness in body from high heat. He was trying to tell us in a screaming voice ~~that to~~ ~~we put our~~ our uniforms on immediately, or he will let us out in the snow naked. My fainting spell disappeared and the blood I still had rose to my head. I felt humiliated and angry and I wanted to rip off the uniform off this screaming puppet, and silence his squeaky voice with his own gun. Instead I ground my teeth with fury, and thought that ^{God} must be dwelling in a faraway place.

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In the beginning

Before the war we lived in Brzeziny, a town of Jewish taylors. The population 60% Jewish. There is not a single Jew living in Brzeziny today. Our house still exists occupied by strangers - I was told by people who visited.

My father and ^{grand}his father owned a manufacturing business in Brzeziny. They were producing high quality men's apparel , and father travelled to large cities selling the finished product. I remember when the Germans came, and were taking out all the barrels of material stored in Grandpas house, grandfather Eckstein was beating his chest and wailing: Rebono she Olam. But there was no answer.

Grandfather Mordkowicz from my mother's side owned a hardware store located in the center of town. My uncles worked in the store and on Wednesday, the market day, peasants were swarming in and out the door all day. I watched how my uncles sold them bolts, nails and whatever their needs were.

Both families were very well situated and known in town by the Jews and the Poles. We had help at home and I had a governess. We went on vacations to resorts during the winter and in the summer. In the winter we went to Zakopany, a winter resort. Mother wanted me to learn how to ski, and I still feel in my nostrils the awful smell of castor oil my boots were rubbed with. in the summer mother took us to the country. In the forest we gathered mushrooms, blueberries and colorful leaves. We had a hammock in the trees where we rocked with mother.

Marilka and I loved these outings with mother. We could freely play, run in rain puddles warm in the summer. There was no one to reprimand us. We listened to mother's melodic voice, and her hands touching us soft as chaneel.

The beginning of war

We were a rather large family but during the war the Germans cut down our number. From grandparents, four aunts and four uncles, cousins, to nothing. They burned our comfortable homes, closed down our schools proclaiming learning was verboten. Our parents and grandparents were stripped of their titles, honorable positions in town. They threw us into the Lodz Ghetto. Our mother was taken earlier. The Germans came and took her without explanation. In the cold snow I stood watching mother's black coat disappear. The imprints of her small shoes remained in the snow. I waited hoping she will come back, they will return her to me and Marilka. Without mother life was a living hell. I missed her presence in every corner of the house. Her voice, her hands stroking me* I knew Marilka felt her disappearance although she didn't talk about it. She was six years old and already all this was happening to her. One post card arrived from mother telling us she was better. A frail hope kindled my heart. I stood by the window watching for the familiar crown of her black hair, her narrow face. She didn't come back. Tears and sobbing didn't help. Today she lives in ferns of the forest, close to the wild konwalja she loved. The tiny white bells with a heavenly scent.

* no one took care of our cloth or our souls.

In the Lodz Ghetto everyone prayed for a loaf of bread. Food had become the focus of our lives. We lived in one room. Father, grandmother and my aunt. My sister and I slept together in my crib, elbow to elbow.

We have become prisoners without crime. Skeletons, apparitions.. My sister and I couldn't wait till the small ration of bread was given to us by grandmother that looked like a scarecrow losing the flesh of her heavy body. Once I noticed a pushke of pork meat with a lot of white fat, in the window, so no one will see it. Father must have gotten it. I climbed on a chair and carefully snatched a piece of meat for Marilka and me, so no one will see. We sat down on the floor licking our fingers,

Before the War

I was born in Lodz, 9 years before the war. I remember uncle Moniek telling me later how he waited for my mother to return from the hospital, and how he stood by the crib watching this red bundle of skin crying. Uncle Moniek is not with us anymore. He died a quick death from cancer. He was the last of my uncles and my favorite one.

When I grew a little and could run and talk, He took me with him to Mrs. Plocka to get flowers for Shabbat, and I walked proudly holding the bouquet. I could pronounce "fatki" in Polish instead of "keviatki". I loved uncle Moniek and the home of my grandmother where all my uncles and aunts lived. Aunt Balbina was married and lived in Bydgoszcz with her husband and son Leonek. We went to visit them one time and I slept in a separate room all by myself and I was afraid. I couldn't find the bathroom and stumbling in that direction I knocked over a vase with flowers, and luckily it was silver. I was happy to ^{back}~~back~~ be back home. I felt so very embarrassed.

Marilka was born four years later. She had curly blond hair and father's gray eyes. I remember mother changing her diapers and how she wiggled and wiggled. She was very lively my little sister. Father wanted a son but he was presented with two daughters. Marilka was a consolation because she resembled him physically, and also in temperament. I was this quiet dreamy child that didn't appeal to my father. He always reprimanded me; I didn't do my school work, didn't help mother in the kitchen, didn't find his newspapers.

Before beginning

My mother's parents didn't approve of father's courtship. They didn't think father was a suitable contender for mother's hand. They didn't like his family, so they sent mother away from Brzeziny to relatives in Wilno hoping this separation will cure her love. Little they knew about that flame. When mother returned father came with wild flowers in his hand. Mother received him with embraces and kisses. He continued courting mother like before. Her parents soon realized there was no simple cure for this love, and reluctantly they accepted.

I still have the wedding picture of my parents and there are fifty people in it, all family. My uncles, aunts cousins. My grandparents. Even my great great grandmother is sitting in a place of honor. No one from that happy picture is alive today. Mother and father looked beautiful on their wedding day

We lost all our wealth and luxuries. Our house on Rogowska St. where we were growing up in muslin dresses. I was in this house mother sewed the snow queen gown for me, I cherished. And to this house came the germans loitering and taking anything to their hearts desire. And this is where they took my snow queen gown that melted in their arms to nothing. Being a witness I will always remember my dress being taken, my childhood cut by the blades of war. The same happened to Marilka, my sister but being four years younger than me, she was such a small child it was difficult to know what she was thinking. She walked around the house like a silent shadow. looking for something to eat, a kind word from her father.

Marilka was too young to come with me and I attempted to teach her the alphabet at home. I taught her how to write her name Miriam.

Father was managing a large factory in the ghetto with another man by the name Blaugrund. They produced beautiful clothing made by the artists in the ghetto. Everything of course was done for the Germans. I had an opportunity to work with Basia, the leader for the workshop for women. She taught me to sew by hand, join seams of a chiffon dress by a beautiful stitch. I also worked at the factory given out white markers to workers. Marilka, being so small stayed at home. After the war I was told that Basia didn't survive, she died in Auschwitz..

Every day father was afraid to go to the factory. He said the Germans were unpredictable. One moment they liked you and in another they might kill you without scruples.

Bock, bock, bock clopped the wooden shoes on the cold cement, asphalt. Our faces pale as paer. How could anyone dispute such evidence?

We worked in the aviation factory driving screws in steel aeroplane parts. I stood by a long table and did whatever the Meister told me. He was a slight, red haired and freckled man, and he was good to me. He allowed me to crawl under the long table, and warm water with a torch, and I could wash there the only undergarments I had. When the aulseherin was walking through, he would tap me lightly, and i would jump up and stand by the table working with the torch. He made a steel berrette for my hair. He brought me bites to eat like canned fruit, small sandwiches, a banana, and once he brought me a piece of chocolate. Can you imagine? chocolate in this starvation factory was like food from paradise. I haven't seen chocolate for years and hardly remembered what it looked like. I had to eat these little treasures in the restroom so no one will notice. Herr Meister told me the war was coming to an end and then we will be able to take revenge. But the Gestapo are planning to kill all of you before the end of the war, der Meister said. "You don't worry" he whispered. "I will hide you in the cellar of my home."

The next morning the Meister was gone and in his place stood a stern hard looking German who didn't give me anything and didn't promise to save me.

The stolen Bread

In the concentration camp I had this uncanny habit of saving my bread. Each day I would put away half of my ration in a yellow sack which I always carried with me. I had a feeling that I could never be hungry and I had this treasure no one could take from me.

One snowy night when the aeroplanes raided the sky we were forced out with rifles from the barrack and pushed in the snow to the bunker where we stayed huddled till the airraid was over. The aufseherin pushed me with her rifle and I was afraid her seeing my bread, and left it hanging on my bunk bed. When we returned my heart sunk. My bread was gone and only the yellow sack hung dangling, flying as if the wind was inside it. I knew one of the prisoners took it and by then probably devoured it without scruples or conscience. I wanted to protest but I didn't know who took my bread. I was the youngest of all the prisoners in our barrack, and who would listen to me? I was too downbeaten to say anything and yet I had this strong feeling of injustice done to me, a crime when ~~my~~ ~~life~~ a piece of my life was stolen. And we were all in the same predicament. We were all hungry and receiving the same ration ~~of bread~~. How could anyone have stolen my bread and eaten it..

From then on I ate all of my bread every day. I never found out who stole my bread.

In Ravensbruck

In negation to an earlier promise that we will not be sent off to concentration camps, the Lodz Ghetto was being liquidated and we sent off to different concentration camps. The trains took us somewhere and we didn't know where. Without water or food we lay on the floor and watched how the Germans separated us. I was separated from my family and didn't know where Marilka or father or grandma were going. They were called off the train, and I was left alone with a fear in my heart. Where was I going and what will tomorrow bring. I was left to my own devices and in German hands. From then on life had become utterly unbearable. My will to live, my beliefs were at times shattered.

I was brought to camp Ravensbruck, a camp for German offenders, thieves, murderers and prostitutes. I knew nothing what had become of Marilka, father, grandma and my aunt. I just existed here in these freezing walls with scraps of bread to eat.

Each morning at 4:00 a.m. to the aviation factory in Wuttemberg (2-3 miles distance) from Ravensbruck. ~~We=were escorted~~ It was a bitter winter in Germany. We shivered under our black white striped garments. We were escorted by Gestapo soldiers with rifles on their shoulders. We were forced to sing songs like "Deutschland Deutschland uber alles" Germany Germany above all, so people in town will believe we were happy and treated well.

I didn't hear anything from Marilka or father. I didn't know whether they were alive. I also thought about my mother wondering where she was and if she was well. I missed my family. In this bleak existence there was nothing. The cold at night without blankets, the marching to the aviation factory in Wutemberg at dawn. The tin cup with watery soup, and commanding German voices. And yet we lived, we survived every day hoping the next one will bring something bright. We were stronger than hunger, stronger than the Germans, and stronger than all the misery we have endured.

The Bathhouse

Once in two weeks we were taken to a bathhouse to kill our lice, and be able to wash our demaciated bodies. The heat was turned on so high I remember fainting on one instance, and a Gestapo woman telling me how pretty my eyes were when they were shiny and feverish. On another occassion a soldier came in in his uniform in front of us naked women and threatened us. If we don't get dressed in a hurry he said he will force us out naked in the snow. I thought about our dignity. How dare he come here and disturb our naked privacy. My blood rushed inside but what could I do? They all had rifles on their shoulders ready to shoot. What did I do to deserve such humiliation? Why this life full of torture? These questions constantly crowded my head. Meanwhile I waited for another scrap of bread and a tin of waterysoup.

The war was coming to an end. We could feel it in the spring air. The snow melted outdoors, and we didn't freeze that much inside the barracks. I even saw the sun playing on my lice jacket. And no one told us. We didn't see a newspaper for years, and we didn't know what the sound of radio was like. One day the Gestapo started leaving the camp. They boarded their jeeps and motorcycles and took off. But in the evening they were back speaking in hushed voices which was a far cry from their commanding shouts.

Liberation

The Germans were back and again we settled into the slave routine. We hid in our barracks waiting for what might happen. We didn't march to the aviation factory, just sat aimlessly on our bunk beds. The gestapo were restless, forgetting to yell at us. Clearly there was something on their mind taking the attention from us. From the window we saw the Germans fleeing again. This time a messenger arrived on a motorcycle and with a flushed face and pounding breath he must have brought some urgent news. The Aufseherinen didn't even run to their barrack. They mounted the jeeps, the trucks the way they were and took off. We sat stupefied. We didn't trust them. Maybe they will fool us again and come back, set us again in the routine of marching to the aviation factory, running to the bunker in the snow during airraids. All these speculations were dissipated. We heard artillery shots very close and a heavy fighting began

on the territory of our camp. We sat terrified not knowing what to do, not being accustomed to make decisions on our own. We ran to the bunker close by and there we stayed listening to the frightening sounds of war. This was worse than the air raids. Death waited outside the bunker on every step, in every bullet shot. We tried to think who was fighting against the Germans, the Russians or the Americans. We couldn't tell. Not seeing a newspaper for six years, not listening to the radio, not hearing from anyone like Herr Meister who was gone, we had no idea who were the soldiers fighting on these grounds. We were so close now to the actual war, close to the danger. We sat without food nor water leaning on the cold walls of the bunker. Even though it looked like spring outside, we knew it by patches of grass visible from the opening in this bunker, yet it was still winter, and some snow didn't melt. We sat like this for three days and three nights. We saw the day dissolve into night and the light breaking with the next day. The fighting continued without pause. Our eyes were on the opening of the bunker. We couldn't see much except the patches of grass, a ray of sun. We heard artillery shots and bullets whistle in the air. The war was so close to us, and we didn't know when it was going to end. We didn't know if our lives will be saved. We found a tarnished pail to eliminate in. We passed it from one trembling hand to another, and in this human stench we sat. We didn't see food for days and yet we continued to eliminate and eliminate. In the night we fell to the ground in the cold bunker to attempt moments of sleep full of nightmares.

We leaned on each other to save a little warmth still left in our bodies. And when dawn peeked through the opening and the fighting outside continued we held on to the pail of shit with our hands feeling the collective stench in our nostrils.

We heard steps outside the bunker and saw black boots running. A fear gripped me. Could it be the German soldiers were coming back to torture us again? We heard Russian voices and Russian soldiers entered the bunker. They asked who were in Russian. One of us answered in Russian telling them we were prisoners in this camp. Wouldn't they know I thought, from our looks and the stench in the bunker. From our worn faces and bodies.

The Russians didn't waste much time and told us to leave the bunker and the Ravensbruck camp. They told us to run beyond the hills and their forces were there, occupying the German city. Maybe this was wutemberg where we used to march dawn to the aviation factory. It probably was a closer town than wutemberg. All I know was that I was the first one to run out the bubker after the soldiers left. I wondered how how my weak legs and starved body carried me. I ran under whistling bullets ducking by a tree. There are moments when the spirit and will to live conquer physical condition. I ran over charred bodies of German soldiers, over swastikas burning. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. Suddenly I saw her, carried on a stretcher, Marscha from my barrack, blood on her head.

A pain gripped me and I stopped in midst of liberation standing face to face with death. Why did she have to die on that day when everything became possible again. Her family was waiting for her. A new life with new promises waited. A home, a child. A bullet whistled by my head and I was reminded the war was still raging on the soil we walked, and I continued running reciting Kaddish in my head. Why did she have to die on this liberation day. God's will offered no explanation.

The sounds of war stopped. The bullets, the artillery shots. I started walking in a dead city. The Germans fled leaving their beautiful homes, their gardens. They feared the Russian army that entered the city. And I wondered why did they all flee? All of Germany had become a battlefield and they couldn't escape their destiny.

Armed Russian soldiers walked in the streets. They must have learned of the camp and our existence because they talked to us. They addressed me in Russian which I understood. One soldier brought me a skirt and a sweater motioning to get rid of my striped uniform, and I was so enticed with the idea that right there in the street I dropped the despicable garment, and slipped on the human cloth they gave me. I felt so different and new standing in front of a large beautiful house I decided to enter. The Germans were gone and left everything. A table set for dinner. On the stove potatoes were boiling. Several women from our barrack were already there and asked me to stay. I went to the cellar and found the most delightful confitures

and canned fruits, pickles, many cubes of butter and dozens of eggs. I thought I was in paradise. Together with Tzima, Polka and Rachelka we prepared a light dinner of cheese and bread (there was a whole bakery in the cellar). From all the excitement we could hardly eat, our stomach's shrunk from hunger. That night I slept on a real bed, and lay my head on a real pillow. How many times I dreamed of a pillow, just to have a white pillow under my head, and maybe a blanket, just one little blanket to cover myself at night. Now I had white sheets and a feather-bed. And I took a shower in a green tiled bathroom with real fragrant soap. My happiness was complete as I luxuriated under a stream of warm water looking at my thin body. I looked in the window and saw a bright moon glancing.

We stayed in that German home for about two weeks to rest, gain strength and become accustomed to eating again. We cooked all the time. Bean and potato soups, barley and lentil, whatever we could find in the cellar. We used the fresh butter to fry scrambled eggs and we used it on bread. It smelled like almonds. I was helping in the kitchen and doing what I was told by Tzima, Polka and Rachelka. I remember baking cookies, rows of animal cookies on large sheets. At first we couldn't digest the food at all, and ran to the restroom all the time. Sometime we had to stand in line, line of three, so urgent was our elimination. Slowly we became accutommed to eating normal ^{human} food and our systems were able to tolerate it.

One late evening there was a knock on the door. A Russian soldier obviously drunk walked in staggering from side to side. We were sitting in the spacious living room talking about our plans for the future and trusting our families were alive. And what we were going to do with all that freedom that had become ours again. We will walk, ride in a tram, go to the movies, go shopping to a real store, a food store with cheeses and sausages you could smell ^{blocks} ~~flies~~ away. We will have an ice cream and napolion party. And I thought now that I was grown up I won't listen to my father, and just do what I please.

The Russian soldier looked around with his blood shot eyes. Tzima, Polka and Rachelka slipped out of the room. I wasn't going to run, to hide, now that I had my freedom. I was left alone with the soldier in the room and somehow I wasn't afraid.. He drew a revolver and started following me around the room, and I confronted him without a blink in the eye. We made several rounds that way. I saw that something was troubling him. Suddenly he dropped the revolver to the floor and started crying. I watched him curiously not understanding what happened to him. He reached for the opening in the shirt on his chest, and drew out a small tarnished Magen David. "I am a Jew" he gasped in Russian, "this is what the war makes of us." "Will you forgive me?" I felt sorry for the Jewish soldier and yet how dared he to come here and accost us? After all the Russian soldiers must have learned about the concentration camps and their victims, and they should have stayed away from us. I sat and talked to my newly found friend for a while and he left repeating his apologies.

When the women returned to the room I told them what happened. "You are a hero", they said. "You have prompted this man to return to his Jewishness."

"Yes, a hero or a fool" I said. "I took a risk. The whole scene could have had different results. I was lucky."

After liberation when I changed the striped uniform into human cloth, when I stayed with the women in the German house where we fed ourselves , and tried to recover from the trauma of the barracks, the barbed wire and the heavy boots. Much later in life I discovered the plague stayed within me, and freedom came only in fragments..

During that time after liberation I felt happy. The exhilaration of leaving the barracks, the barbed wire. not hearing commanding voices gave me a feeling of freedom long awaited and so ardently missed.

There was A Russian soldier who took a liking to me. He spoke in Russian for long hours about his motherland and how happy he will be to return home. How lucky he was to survive while many of his comrades were killed in Battle. He wanted to take me to Russia with him. He had twenty seven watches buried in the garden of his home and he will share this wealth with me. Not being familiar with the Russian culture or economy at that time, I thought this was a strange concept of wealth. He was very serious and I was flirtatious..

One day we left the hospitable German home that kept us fed and well for several weeks. We were thankful. I found a ~~man~~

